

DESCRIPTIVE POETRY.*

WE have more than once in our pages propounded the question "what is poetry?" and have satisfied ourselves at least, if not our readers, with the answer. Our attention has been recalled to the subject by a very elegant volume of the poems of Mr. Street; and, as these poems are chiefly of a descriptive character, we shall seize the opportunity to discuss, in connexion with them, the two great classes into which poetry divides itself, and to point out the difference between the mere copyist of nature, who appeals only to our admiration, and the truer, because more ideal poet, who elevates the mind with images superne, warms the heart with noble sentiments, and, like the prophet of old, makes us forget himself in the glorious truths he utters. And first for the poems.

The longest poem in this volume is a story of Indian warfare engrafted on a series of exquisite descriptions of natural scenery. The tale is of the simplest kind. After a panygeric upon America, the author introduces two lovers walking together on an August afternoon. They meet a stranger and proceed to the village, then a frontier settlement guarded by a block house. By a single leap we are now carried to the dead of winter, and a fine picture of a snow-storm and of our winter scenery ensues. We are then introduced to the revelry of a guard-room, whose soldiers are celebrating the bridal of the lovers. Suddenly an attack is made on the party by a band of hostile Indians, who have, when the feasters were rejoicing in fancied security, found a way into the fort. A combat ensues, the village is fired, and scenes of personal as well as general strife are recorded. The retreat and rejoicings of the victorious savages, and the pursuit by the colonists follow. The poem concludes with an elegant description of the graves of the lovers, who, we should have mentioned, fall in the attack. This tale reminds us of Brougham's description of the statesmanship of Sheridan. It is neither a bad story, nor a good story, nor an indifferent story—the fact is, it is no story at all. Of this, however, the author is aware, and has modestly admitted, in the preface, that his "slight thread of narrative" "does not aim at the continuous interest of a tale." The incidents are thrown in merely to connect the descriptions together, and fill the same position in the poem, as the thread does in a string of beads. We shall dismiss the incidents and characters without further remark.

Many of the descriptions, however, are eminently beautiful. The author has a keen eye for the characteristics of visible nature, and paints with elaborate nicety. The most ordinary person will perceive, in the

* The Burning of Schenectady, and other poems. By Alfred B. Street. 1 vol. Albany, W. C. Little, 1842.

following picture, the minute skill of a finished artist, as well as the close observation of the man of genius.

"An August day—a dreamy haze
 Films air, and mingles with the skies,
 Sweetly the rich dark sunshine plays,
 Bronzing each object where it lies,
 'Till stream and tree and rocky pyro
 Seem lit with streaks of dusky fire.
Outlines are melted in the gauze
That Nature veils; the fitful breeze,
 From the thick pine low murmuring, draws;
 And that light *Comus* of the trees
 The aspen, as the balmy rover
 Creeps by, with mirth is quivering over;
 The bee is slumbering in the thistle,
 And, now and then, a broken whistle
 A tread—a hum—a tap—is heard
 Through the dry leaves, in grass and tree,
 As insect, animal and bird
 Rouse, briefly from their lethargy:
 Then, even these pleasant sounds would cease,
 And a dead stillness all things lock,
 The aspen seems like sculptured rock,
 And not a tassel thread be shaken
 The parent-pine's deep trance to waken,
 And Nature settles prone in drowsy peace."

And again, when he describes a stream winding through the woods.

"There the thick alder-branches weave
 A verdant net beside, across,
 So dense and dark as scarce to leave
 Glimpse of the water's sliding gloss.
 Along, are scattered willow-groups,
 Their yellow sprays the surface tipping;
 And, roots half loose, half clinging, stoops,
 The elm, its slant boughs deeply dipping,
 Making the stream with bubbles wroth
 That, wheeling into coverts deep,
 Mingle to clumps of snowy froth.
 Whence, flakes detached, slow melting, creep;
 The forest, in tall column'd ranks,
 Forming mass'd backgrounds to the banks."

Equal in graphic force of language is the picture of twilight drawing on.

"With wide expanded feet, like wings,
 The flying squirrel shoots his way;
 And, grating on its tiny strings,
 The cricket shrills its evening lay;
 The cowbell tolls its curfew near,
 Tinkling, like silver, sweet and clear,
 The other air-boats, moor'd in nest,
 Mutter and chirp themselves to rest."

His descriptions of winter scenery are no less forcible. Witness the following:—

"Now clothed in one wide sheet of snow,
 Showing a pale and ghastly scene,
 Save where pines lift their spires of green,
 And surly hemlocks, pointing high,
 Braid network masses on the sky."
 "The stooping sun has found a shroud
 Within a thick gray rising cloud:
 A damp and chilling wind is fluttering
 Through the slight softening air, and muttering
 In low sounds, down a wild ravine
 Whose sides jut out in rocky ledges;
 On either hand, huge pine trees lean,
 Grasping, with snake-like roots, the edges,
 Shaping a bristling bower o'erhead,
 Scarce pervious to the winter snow,
 Where frozen moss, and pine-fringe, spread
 Carpets, of brown and green, below:"

"The hounds are crouching by the blaze,
Slow winking in their dozing gaze,
Mearing the drops of sap exude
In shrill hiss, from the steaming wood."

These quotations will give our readers a better idea of the elaborate touches by which Mr. Street brings out his pictures, than any thing we could say. Now and then a single word flashes a whole scene upon us, but more usually a succession of minute strokes produces the effect. We do not think, however, that the author has shewn his judgment in the measure chosen for this poem. We confess our predilection for the blank verse in which the masters of our tongue have ever clothed their thoughts. And we think we can convince even Mr. Street of his error by referring to the two poems, "The Forsaken Road," and "The Old Bridge," both in this volume, where the required effect is produced in half the number of lines that would be allotted to the same purpose in the octo-syllabic measure. If any thing more is wanting to ensure his conversion, let us call his attention to his description of a snow-storm, and compare it with the blank verse of Thomson and Cowper, on the same event. The following is from the poem of Mr. Street:—

"the dull thick cloud has spread
Its dusky blotting haze o'erhead,
Close narrowing the horizon's bound;
While a few snow-flakes, swerving, sail,
Like blossoms, that the breath of May
Shakes from the white garb'd cherry-spray,
Then, thickening to a light, loose veil
Woven of spangles, fluttering round:
Wildier the flakes chaotic teem
Until the gauzy atoms stream
In elant lines downward steadily
On mountain, valley, roof and tree,
Save when the wind, now rising fast
To the full fury of a blast,
Fitfully sweeps the gray streak'd haze
Into a dim and whirling maze.
The village dwellings scarcely show
Their outlines in the mist of snow:
Round the church belfry, whirls and floats
A quivering swarm of silvery motes,
And a white net-like curtain falls
Across the fort's large looming walls.
No colors tell the daylight's pass,
But darkness thickens to a mass.
Through the black gloom, hurl'd clouds of snow
Spinning aloft and dashing low,
Shoot in an instant flash of white,
Athwart the gazer's dizzy sight."

Apart from the excessive and often criminal elaboration here perceptible, which destroys the clearness of the passage by the multitude of objects presented to the eye, we can see how the poet is trammelled by the fetters of rhyme, forcing him to dilute into two verses what ought to be confined to one. Place, in contrast to the quotation, the blank verse of Thomson and Cowper, and the superior strength of the latter will at once be evident. We quote now from the Seasons.

"The keener tempests rise; and fuming dun
From all the livid east, or piercing north,

Thick clouds ascend; in whose capacious womb
A vapory deluge lies, to snow congeal'd.
Heavy they roll their fleecy world along;
And the sky saddens with the gather'd storm.
Through the hush'd air the whitening shower descends.
At first thin wavering; till at last the flakes
Fall broad, and wide, and fast, dimming the day,
With a continual flow. The cherished fields
Put on their winter-robe of forest white.
'Tis brightness all; save where the new snow melts
Along the mazy current. Low the woods
Bow their hoar head; and ere the languid sun
Faint from the west emits his evening ray
Earth's universal face, deep hid, and chill,
Is one wild dazzling waste, that buries wide
The works of man. Drooping, the laborer ox
Stands covered o'er with snow —"

And how, by a few dashing strokes, Cowper brings out the scene.

"Fast falls a fleecy shower: the downy flakes
Descending, and with never ceasing lapse,
Softly alighting upon all below,
Assimilate all objects."

But we will not argue so plain a case. Mr. Street himself has given testimony, as we have before said, to the superior efficacy of blank verse by numerous poems of that description. The finest one in the volume is "The Forsaken Road," which we quote. It is distinguished chiefly for the accurate observation of the author, and for the graphic, though minute skill of his descriptions. The verse is sometimes rugged, and indeed none of our poet's measures are remarkable for melody.

THE FORSAKEN ROAD.

In the deep shadows of the wilderness,
Arbor'd by branches a forsaken road
Winds on in two faint wheel-marks: striping now
The soft black mould, now hidden by the leaves
Dropp'd at the breath of Autumn, seaming here
The hollow wet with oozing springs, and there
Traced lightly on the firm and level glade.
Now it is lost within a sward of grass
Spread pleasantly, with scatter'd groups of trees,
A place to lie in, when the summer sun
Throws broken gold; thence winds it through the shade,
With time-stain'd blazes on the thronging trunks
Sliced either hand. Within the densest spot,
A pine has stretch'd its giant barricade,
Bulging with knots and fork'd with splinter'd twigs,
The shroud-like moss o'ermentling; as it lies
So motionless, so powerless in decay,
I start to think its shatter'd summit once
Flaunted its daring challenge to the storm
And told its fall in thunder. Still the wreck
Hath pleasant uses; its high twining roots
Are chambers for the squirrel, and its frame
Keeps bare a stripe of mossy nut-strew'd earth
From the white drift that blocks the opposite side,
So that the tenants of the base might steal
In the brief glimpses of the winter sun
To find the scatter'd treasures.

Onward still
I trace the road; tall saplings in the midst,
Then tawny grain-crack'd fragments, crumbling fine
As my foot sinks within them, then a mound
Of the sweet low-stemm'd wintergreen, a bridge
Of logs then lying crosswise o'er a stream,
Gaping with chasms and tottering dank with age

A frail support; until the stone piled wall
Cuts sharp across, and smiling farm-fields hide
All traces of the pathway.

As I tread

The lonely road, now scaring with my steps
The whizzing partridge, hushing with my form
The thresher's song, and baring with my knife
The darken'd hack o'erlaid with bark and rings
That years have circled, I give rein to thought,
And images throng round me. First the deer
Seeking the lick, leaves prints: the midnight wolf
Scenting his prey, tramps o'er: the red man fierce,
Treads in the faint but noted marks, least moss
And mould should show his trail. In after years
His compass the surveyor stakes, and carves
Rude letters on the trees that, gifted thus
With language, tell the windings of the way.
And then the emigrant's huge wagon-tent
Gleams white between the trunks, with household goods,
Piled in and dangling round, and midst them group'd
Childhood and matron age, the flock and herd
Straggling behind, the patriarch and his sons
Loitering before with axes, hewing wide
The underbush, and bridging o'er the streams,
And kindling in the dell, when frowns the night,
Their bivouac for slumber.

Then with toil

The settler trudges o'er, his shoulders bent
Beneath his burthen from the distant mill,
To feed his famishing children. And as Time
Smooths the rough clearing to the smiling field,
The heavy wagon jolts across the roots
To the far market, and the tardy wheel
Therefrom bears loads of rustic merchandize.
And then as scatter'd walls of logs are merged
Into thick village roofs, the forest road
Is left, for the smooth spacious thoroughfare
Linking the hamlet to the river-side.
How like this lonely road, the track of life!
Our infant steps are Fear's. Dark Cruelty
And fierce Revenge then tread upon their way;
Till later Reason's compass points our course,
Marking the path with prudence. Daring Hope
The Pioneer, its bosom freighted deep
With all our feelings, follows; hewing down
The barriers with the edge of energy,
Bridging o'er Fortune's many adverse streams,
And lighting sorrow's frequent night with flame
Of solace till the morrow. Trials come—
Endurance hath succeeded Hope, and still
We tread beneath the burthens of our care,
For those we love are cherish'd. Then as home
Brightens to comfort; in our daily path
We reap reward of hardship; and as joys
Cluster around us, the smooth easy path
Of peaceful being leads us to the grave;
And the rough early road is shunn'd, for Time
To shroud its varied surface from our thoughts;
With proud Ambition lying prone across,
A dead and shatter'd wreck; yet sheltering close
(Its fragments turn'd by dire experience
To holier use than when it stood erect.)
By stern remembrance of its miseries,
Its wrestling warfare and its rending fall,
Home feelings, and the gentle ties of love
From perishing in the snow drift of the world.

Of the other poems in the volume all have been published in a fugitive form, except "The Old Bridge," "Moonlight," and one entitled "Seek and ye shall find." The poems in the Iambic measure are chiefly on sporting subjects; but we may remark in passing, that this verse, in the hands of Mr. Street, possesses unusual force. Those of our readers, who have seen "The

Grey Forest Eagle," will assent to the justice of this remark. But we will now dismiss the volume, and having accorded Mr. Street our praise for his poems, proceed to enquire into the rank which he holds in the great empire of mind.

Mr. Street is essentially a descriptive poet. In that term is embodied all his merits and defects. He paints visible nature with a fidelity that is wonderful, bringing up to the mind's retina, by a succession of minute touches, the picture he wishes to present. The most ordinary mind recognizes in his verse familiar objects, and can appreciate the skill with which they are drawn. The tree that overhangs the stream, the mossy mill that whirrs in the glen, the old hunting trail in the forest, the bridge whereon in childhood we sat to angle, the church spire in the valley, the mist upon the mountain, the whirling river, the spinning snow, the hiss of the angry freshet, the desolate block house, the haunt of the wild deer, the trout pound and the bivouac, all these are pictured in his rhyme with an accuracy that bewitches us. But he never, or rarely rises into the ideal world. With the spirits that hold dominion in the higher walks of mind he has no communion. To him the loftier inspirations of the muse are wanting. He sees common objects in common lights; but he sees nothing more. Around his landscapes may shine the brightest of earthly sunsets, but it is never given him to behold the golden twilight of the eternal city. What Teniers was among painters he is among poets. What the Old Mortality is to the Apollo a descriptive poem is to an ideal one.

We make no claim here which cannot be substantiated. It is the testimony of all ages that the mere observer is of a lower grade of intellect than he who both observes and combines. And this is true in every department of the human mind. A thousand men, before Newton, had seen an apple fall, without thinking of the cause. Mariners had often heard of the strange canes and human bodies floated to the Azores, but only Columbus saw in them the evidence of land to the west. The battles of Napoleon were won by availing himself of incidents which other generals would have thought useless; and Watt by a chain of splendid combinations gave to the world the steam engine. The sculptor who cut the Venus, and the artist who raised the Parthenon merely combined the forms of beauty which they had observed separate in nature. We question whether in the ideal world the same process is not going on. We are inclined to think that the results produced by the highest imaginative genius, and which flash across the mind as if from inspiration, come from a series of combinations carried on with a velocity which deceives us as to their origin. But this divine faculty is given only to the loftiest order of minds. Mere talent sees objects in nature, and truthfully depicts them, but genius

conceives visions of supernal beauty, by combining the elements of beauty which exist around us. Teniers saw in the Flemish peasants only the country servant and the boor. But Raphael beheld other things beside those of earth. In his wild longings for immortal beauty, his imagination learned to glorify and exalt every thing on which he looked, until prophets, saints and apostles, seraphim and cherubim crowded on his mental retina. He had visions of angles with harps of gold, of martyrs who had passed to Paradise from fire and rack, of the immaculate Virgin herself, and of that one, holier than all, the infant Saviour. And ever on his ear, sleeping or waking, fell hymns of heavenly melody. All these, as if inspired from on high, he made immortal on his canvass. And here we arrive at another characteristic of the superiority of the ideal over the common mind. We may gaze on the smokers of Ostend forever, and never think but of the artist's skill; but no man can look on the pictures of Raphael without feeling purer emotions gushing up within him. Visions of eternal beauty, strains of silent but celestial music, foreshadowings of the holy and the infinite break on us as we gaze: the mind expands; the bosom glows; and we long to soar upward to a brighter world, and hold communion with the beatified in heaven. So in poetry, the great masters not only evince this power of combination, but the emotions of beauty they kindle in us purify and exalt the soul. The grand old fathers of English verse seem especially to do this. Amid the tedious allegories of Spenser walks heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb, like an angel sent on earth to win us to heaven by her smiles. There is scarcely a female character in Shakspeare whose contemplation does not make us better men. No one can read the epic of Milton without catching a spark of his celestial fire, and seeming to hear the songs of angels, and the chaunts of the redeemed. To come down to our own time: even in Byron there are glimpses of supernal beauty, breaking through his stormy verse like a summer sunset through a thunder cloud. We have no doubt that poetry is destined to perform a high part in the amelioration of our race. We never knew a man who could truly admire our ideal poets, who was not, so far forth, a better man; and who, if he fell at last, fell because there were other tendencies more powerful in his mind to drag him down. And it is no answer to our position to ask us to shew the reformation that poesy has worked. She moves on the hearts of men like the face of Jehovah on the waters at Creation. We have all felt her power when lending to her a willing ear. There is, in the Pilgrim's Progress, a picture of a man raking among dust and ashes for dross, while an angel floats above his head, offering a golden crown: but he will not look up. So, the angel Poesy soars overhead, but few listen to her words; yet those

who do, win immortal wealth, and catch glimpses of Paradise from her serene face.

In mere descriptive poetry there is little of this divine power. But it must not be forgot that we speak now of *merely descriptive* poets. There are many who combine the qualities of both schools to which we have adverted, in their highest degree; and indeed the best ideal poets are usually the best descriptive ones. But the rule does not apply when the order is inverted. And that writer is a descriptive, in contradistinction to an ideal poet, whose fidelity to nature is his chief characteristic, even though glimmerings of imagination may now and then break through his verse. In this order we class Mr. Street.

But in so doing let us do him full justice. Though not of the highest order of genius, he claims precedence in the rank to which he belongs. He may not be a purely ideal poet, but he is the first of our descriptive ones.

LOVE.

BY ALEXANDER A. IRVINE.

Long I wandered in the night,
To the pelting tempest bared,
Hideous shapes upon my sight
'Through the ghastly darkness glared.

Voices wailed within the gloom,
Hollow echoes moaned around,
And I heard the traveller's doom
In the unseen river's sound.

Not a star was on my way,
Doubt and death my soul oppress,
And I sat me down to pray
While the rain froze on my breast.

Lo! a vision in the air
Fainter than dim altar spark,
And a voice of sweetness rare
Melted through the icy dark.

With a halo round her head
Then outshone a virgin tall,
Rosy clouds beneath her tread
Moved in circles musical.

Down she stepped, and kneeling, bound
Ointments on my bleeding feet,
Wrapped me in her garments round,
Cheering me with whispers sweet.

Then she sat her down by me,
Stayed my head upon her breast,
And with songs melodiously
Soothed me weary into rest.

Doubt and fear and pain were spent,
Love thereafter was my stay,
And rejoicing forth we went
Hand in hand upon our way.